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ABSTRACT

The preparation of preservice teachers plays a major role in closing the achievement gap in the education of urban children. Urban teachers often do not understand how their low expectations and deficit assumptions influence their instructional practices and contribute to a widening achievement gap between urban and non-urban students. Many teachers do not recognize that requirements for strengthening problem solving/higher order thinking skills include increasing vocabulary, language skills, and comprehension through their instructional strategies. Many urban preservice teachers do not enter teaching with proper content knowledge or information about education for all students. Research shows that urban preservice teachers are predicted to have achievement gaps in their content competencies, which can result in their failure to pass Praxis II tests. The following are strategies to help close preservice teachers' gaps in content knowledge and teaching skills: teacher education programs must place greater emphasis on preparation in content areas; urban teacher educators (UTEs) must find the specific deficit areas of preservice teachers from less advantaged backgrounds and provide instruction to close the gap in their assumptions earlier in their preservice programs; and UTEs must demonstrate that the experiences and cultural backgrounds diverse children bring to urban schools are strengths, not deficits. (SM)

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By Kim H. Song and Faith Christiansen

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ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN URBAN SETTINGS

Kim H. Song & Faith Christiansen

1. OVERVIEW

Many teachers who teach urban children do not understand why the children would fall farther behind if they continue the practice of substituting easier/more enjoyable materials for challenging materials as they continue across grade levels. The preparation of pre-service teachers plays a major role in closing the achievement gap in the education of urban children. As a result, urban teachers need to understand how their possible low expectations and deficit assumptions can influence their instructional practices and contribute to the widening achievement gap that exists between urban students and their more advantaged peers. Research also indicates that, the urban pre-service teachers, most of whom are trained to teach urban P-12 students, are predicated to have the achievement gaps in their content competencies, which can result in their failure to pass Praxis II tests.

2. PREASSUMPTIONS ABOUT URBAN TEACHERS

- Many urban teachers think that the volume of higher order thinking materials, which are parts of the regular curriculum, are too sophisticated for urban children who come to school without sufficient vocabularies for reading comprehension (Williams, 2000).
- Many teachers do not understand that requirements for strengthening problem solving/higher order thinking skills include increasing vocabulary, language skills and comprehension through their instructional strategies (Williams, 2000).
- Many urban pre-service teachers do not enter their teaching careers with proper content knowledge and/or information about education for all students because of surroundings factors such as socioeconomic, previous test performance and their teacher education institutions (Wenglinky, 2000).
- Many urban pre-service teachers from local urban colleges may cause achievement gaps themselves, comparing to their more advantaged peers from more affluent, traditional and suburban universities in terms of the content preparation (Wenglinky, 2000).

3. ISSUE

The achievement gaps between urban children and their more advantaged peers have been a controversial issue for many decades. There have been a number of educators and political leaders who have dealt with this issue. However, according to a recent report (Williams, 2000), the achievement gaps between these two groups are widening, not narrowing. The media focuses on the lower achievement of urban children, which helps the public develop low expectations and deficit assumptions such as, "The quality of one's knowledge is as critical as its quantity," toward our urban children. Urban educators are frustrated by achievement gaps without any knowledge of the roots of these gaps and so do not even try to teach their underachieved children with high expectations or standards. They give easier materials, which may be 'good enough' for their students' comprehension. Urban teachers may not be well equipped with the theories and practices which would lead them to be more effective teachers in the urban settings. Do our urban teachers and/or pre-service teachers know about the developmental status of children, their interest areas, their motivation, their self-esteem, their prior experience and how to relate that information to their teaching delivery?

The controversial cycle of widening achievement gaps may start at the institutionalized educational system where pre-service teachers have been reinforced in their low expectations and deficit assumptions toward our urban children for many decades. These deficit assumptions toward our urban children will not easily be removed. We may not educate society to change their false assumptions toward our urban children in a short time. We may not change the policies at local, state and/or federal levels in a few months. However, we can change the quality of teachers who will influence the core of the education of our urban children. No issue is of greater importance to P-12 education than the quality of the teaching force. There is universal agreement that student success is predicated on effective teachers. (Wenglinky, 2000) Teachers interact with our children for many hours every day. Teachers need to be social agents themselves who can go to their clients, children, and become the very first advocates to stir the fossilized system of low expectations and deficit assumptions toward our urban children. In order to start this change, teacher educators need to realize what deficit assumptions and low expectations may have.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS:

The research findings on the achievement gaps of pre-service teachers are examined by the research division Educational Testing Service (ETS) of student academic performance and the validity of the assessments used to confer licensure. Also used was the Praxis alignment study done by Oregon Quality Assurance in Teaching Program (OQAT). Both research studies used Praxis II tests as their tools to examine their pre-service teachers' achievement.

The ETS report indicated that the teacher education institutions vary greatly in the background characteristics and average licensure scores (Praxis II) of their students. Five characteristics of teacher education institutions, which were conducive to higher teacher licensure scores:

- Private institutions outperform public ones.
- Universities outperform colleges.
- Teacher education programs with a higher number of traditional students outperform those with fewer such students.
- Teacher education programs with ethnically diverse faculties outperform those with overwhelmingly White faculties.
- Institutions with larger proportions of education majors and minors and large proportions of their budgets devoted to teacher education perform worse than institutions with small proportions of education majors and minors and small portions of their budgets devoted to teacher education. (Wenglinky, 2000)

The Oregon Quality Assurance in Teaching Program (O-QAT) reported on their alignment study between their State Competencies and Praxis II test items. This is their summary:

- Several tests reviewed were judged to not be job relevant, which means that the tests are not aligned with State Content Standards and Benchmarks.
- There were missing benchmarks in all content areas and a number of benchmarks were not adequately addressed by the Praxis II tests. The most common concern was that Praxis II test questions were too trivial, not on par with the kind of thinking that students are asked to demonstrate for State assessments. There were gaps in processes of assessment, like scientific inquiry, mathematics problem-solving and literary criticism.
- Reviewers did not think they had appropriate information to allow them to make a judgment about the adequacy of the State's current passing scores. The passing score of the English/Language Arts might be too low while that of social sciences too high.

- The science committee found that no test currently given for teacher education program completion is adequate for the licensing of middle school science teachers.
- The middle school mathematics committee found that the Middle School Mathematics content test to be both job relevant and well aligned with the State Content Standards.

5. IMPLICATIONS

Research tells us is that Praxis II tests are used to measure pre-service teachers' content knowledge and pedagogy. Many test items need to be evaluated in terms of their job relevancy and item difficulty. We have also learned that the controversial cycle of the widening achievement gap is predetermined by the characteristics of teacher education institutions and students' socioeconomic and cognitive backgrounds, i.e., affluence and prior test performance. In other words, before prospective teachers begin their studies in their teacher education program, their success in becoming a teacher has been determined by institutionalized standards or other factors.

As urban teacher educators, we would like to suggest a few alternatives to aide in closing the pre-service teachers' predetermined gaps based on the above research findings and other literature on effective teacher behaviors.

- The urban teacher educators (UTE) need to study to see if there is any alignment between the State Competencies and Praxis II tests of each discipline area.
- The teacher education curriculum needs to adopt not only the NCATE and DESE competencies, but also the areas each Praxis test is covers.
- The teacher education program needs to place greater emphasis on preparation in content areas.
- The UTE need to place a greater effort to have research done to determine if there is a link between teacher preparation practices for teacher effectiveness and our urban children's desired outcomes.
- The UTE need to be aware of the importance of policy making, which needs to move toward greater access for students from less advantaged backgrounds to go into teaching and prepare them to reach the high standards as tested by Praxis II.
- The UTE need to find the specific deficit areas of pre-service teachers from less advantaged backgrounds and provide the instruction to close the gap in their assumptions earlier in their teacher preparation program.
- The UTE need to be advocates who understand their pre-service teachers' backgrounds and nurture them until they acquire all the needed content knowledge and performance skills including meta-cognition.
- The UTE need to prepare their pre-service teachers how their content knowledge needs, need to be delivered with regard to their urban students' prior experience, cultural backgrounds and interests taken into account.
- The UTE need to demonstrate that the experiences and cultural backgrounds their urban children bring to school are strengths, not deficits or weaknesses.

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